

# ALL IS ILLUSION?

## A Chinese-Indian Dichotomy In Advaita and Zen

### [the Wanderling](#)

"When Buddhism went to China, inconsistency became problematic. This was due to the very non-Indian way the Chinese perceived the world and human nature. Unlike Indian thinking, which gave priority to the divine or the trans-human element of reality, Chinese thought gave priority to the human world. The traditional Chinese view was that people are born with an innate sense of goodness, purity and truth, and that the normal human passions are a part of this goodness and an Enlightened sage is someone who accepts this."

[SUDDEN OR GRADUAL ENLIGHTENMENT?](#) Rev Vajra Karuna

In the mid-1920s, a young American about age twenty-five or so, following a somewhat harrowing wartime experience where he saw his best friend die right in front of his eyes, began a ten year spiritual quest that led him to the Far East, India and eventually, Enlightenment.

That young man's story, an actual person in real life, was chronicled in a book written as a novel by W. Somerset Maugham titled [The Razor's Edge](#). The young man, given the pseudonym [Larry Darrell](#) in the book, ended up in the south of India after a number of events, studying under a venerated holy man Maugham called [Shri Ganesha](#). The same way that the Larry Darrell character was based on a real life person, Shri Ganesha was based on a real person as well --- in Ganesha's case, the Enlightened sage of Arunachala,

[Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi](#). It was under the auspices of the Bhagavan that the man Maugham called Darrell Awakened to the Absolute. The HOW of the how the *young man* ended up in India in the first place is perhaps the single most important event presented by Maugham in his novel and is described by him basically as follows:

"Meanwhile, Larry begins a sojourn through Europe taking a job at a coal mine in Lens, France where he befriends a former Polish army officer named [Kosti](#). Kosti encourages Larry to look toward things spiritual for his answers rather than in books. Larry and Kosti leave the coal mine and travel together for a time then part ways. Larry then meets a Benedictine monk named [Father Ensheim](#) in Bonn, Germany while Father Ensheim is on leave from his monastery doing academic research. Father Ensheim, having certain insights other than strictly western spiritual influences, suggests Larry widen his spiritual perimeters and go to India in search of answers."

Many years later as a teenage boy, it was my fortune and privilege to cross paths with and get to know in real life, the exact same person Maugham wrote about that was Enlightened under the grace and light of the Maharshi. Our somewhat unusual first meeting unfolded many years earlier marked by the influence of so-called [Siddhis](#), supernormal perceptual states known throughout Hindu and Buddhist lore and chronicled by me in [THE MEETING: An Untold Story of Sri Ramana](#). In the process of that relationship the man next door became my spiritual Mentor as I began studying under his guidance. The downstream outflow from that meeting and eventual longterm friendship is covered fairly thoroughly in [ZEN ENLIGHTENMENT: The Path Unfolds](#), while who and what happened to the person that was Larry Darrell in real life is explored in a discussion paper I wrote about my Mentor.

What happened to me in those days, however, was not nearly so successful as what transpired with my Mentor in his early days. So unsuccessful were my attempts along the path, my Mentor was just about ready to give up on me when Karma stepped in. It just so happened a highly regarded Japanese Zen master by the name of [Yasutani Hakuun Roshi](#) was coming to the United States for several months and, in that my Mentor knew him, he arranged for

me to study under him. Several years later, after what I refer to as "doing hard time" in a [Zen Monastery](#) located high in the mountains in a remote area along the southern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau in Asia, my mentor arranged for me to continue additional study-practice in the Zen vein under the auspices of the mysterious American Zen master [Alfred Pulyan](#). Thus the triad of experiences opened the door for me to have experience, knowledge and practice under the auspices of both Indian and Chinese branches of Awakening.

Which brings us to the Chinese-Indian dichotomy in the title. My Mentor thought my direction more closely followed Zen than what is typically found under Indian auspices. And he was right. Indian pursuit of Awakening has God a main thesis in the Absolute. Zen requires no such thing. In the end it is like painting legs on a snake, they won't make him walk any better. As D.T. Suzuki writes:

The creator may be found busy moulding his universe, or he may be absent from his workshop, but Zen goes on with its own work. It is not dependent upon the support of a creator; when it grasps the reason for living a life, it is satisfied. Huyen (Wu-tsu Fa-yen, 1024- 1104) used to produce his own hand and ask his disciples why it was called a hand. When we know the reason, there is Satori and we have Zen. Whereas with the God of mysticism there is the grasping of a definite object; when you have God, what is no-God is excluded. This is self-limiting. Zen wants absolute freedom, even from God. "No abiding place" means that very thing; "Cleanse your mouth when you utter the word Buddha" amounts to the same thing.

The great Indian sage Siddharameshwar Maharaj, a contemporary of Sri Ramana, realized the Self using a long, slow, tedious meditation method called Pipilika Marg, the "way of the ant." After Realization, however, he taught "the bird's way," [Vihangam Marg](#). The Bird's Way is a rapid way of Understanding, a more Zen-like, albeit still Indian, DIRECT way of Self-Realization. Vihangam Marg was also the teaching of Siddharameshwar's most accomplished student, Sri Ranjit Maharaj.

Interestingly enough, at about the sametime the young Ranjit was meeting his Master for the first time, the same young American on a spiritual quest toward Enlightenment mentioned above, visited Siddharameshwar as well, one of the

first Americans to do so. Years later, Sri Ranjit Maharaj, a now fully Accomplished sage and Master in his own right, in a question and answer format, was asked the following, and, even though an advocate of the direct method of "the bird's way" responded from his Awakened state reflective of an Indian perspective:

**QUESTION:** *If illusion, are you yourself an illusion?*

**MAHARAJ:** Oh, yes! I am the greatest illusion! All that I say with full heart and so frankly is all false! But the false "I" can make you reach that point. The address of the person is not the goal. When you reach the house, thanks to the address you have been given, the address is true only until the moment you enter the house. As soon as you come in, the address vanishes. Words are nothing else but indications; they have no reality themselves. If "I" remains, I am also illusion. Don't remain as "I." That is the highest understanding of philosophy. Saint Tukaram said: "I have seen my own death, and what I have seen there, the joy that was revealed, that I know." First of all, you must die. "You" means illusion.

Therefore, what I say is false, but true, however, because I speak of **That**. The address is false but when you reach the goal, it is Reality. In the same way, all the scriptures and the philosophical books are meant only to indicate that point, and when you reach it they become non-existent, empty. Words are false; only the meaning they convey is true. They are illusion, but they give a meaning. Therefore, all is illusion but to understand the illusion, illusion is needed. For example, to remove a thorn in your finger you use another thorn; then you throw both of them away. But if you keep the second thorn which was used to remove the first one, you'll surely be stuck again. To remove ignorance, knowledge is necessary, but finally both must dissolve into Reality. Your Self is without ignorance, without knowledge.

Therefore, the Master and the seeker are illusion because they are "one." If you keep the second thorn, which means knowledge, even if it is a golden thorn, you'll be stuck [by the second thorn]. The ego is the only illusion and ego is knowledge. It is said that to catch a thief you must become a thief. Then you can tell him: "Be aware, I am here and I know you are a thief so you won't be able to rob me." But you cannot catch the thief because he has 4 eyes and you have only 2 eyes. At a glance the thief notices the valuables, and if you are not aware, he robs you. Illusion is like the thief, so you must be stronger than the thief. Your mind must accept that all is illusion, only illusion. Then you'll be the "greatest of the greatest."

Knowledge is a great thing but it must be only a remedy. When the fever goes off thanks to the medicine you take, you must stop taking it. Don't prolong the treatment or you will create more problems. Knowledge is necessary only to remove the disease of ignorance. The doctor will always prescribe a limited dosage! First of all, understand the "I" is illusion and what "I" says is illusion. The Master and what He says are also illusion because in Reality, "I" and "He" do not exist anymore. Go deep in yourself, so deep that you disappear. Otherwise see what will happen. A goat came in your house and to make it go out you open the door. The goat goes out but a camel comes in. The camel is just like the illusion. Thus, be out of illusion.

In contrast read the following Zen viewpoint from [All Things Zen](#):

Saying '*All is delusion*' or '*The world is delusion*' is by implication saying illusion/delusion **IS**, that is, that it exists, that it has it's own independent existence, existing independently without need. Dependent origination on the other hand, implies there can be absolutely nothing whatsoever that is real or eternal behind this actual world and beyond the interdependence of everything. Because of that interdependence all that exists is inherently empty. It can be argued on the conventional level there is causation that could or would back up illusion/delusion, but because causation has no inherent existence either, neither then could or would illusion/delusion. To perceive that causation DOES have inherent existence is what is called ignorance. Perceiving that LACK of causation in inherent existence is wisdom.

Almost everybody that reads a little about Zen starts thinking that NOTHING exists because everything is inherently empty, so what we perceive as reality must be delusion. But emptiness is the *absence of independent existence*. What that means is SOMETHING must exist and one of the qualifications of that existence is emptiness...the absence of independent existence is only possible because there is SOMETHING that exists...otherwise there would be no 'need' for the *absence of independent existence*, and if there was no absence of independent existence, then everything would not be empty.

Pretty straight forward stuff. However, what most people start jumping up and down yelling about and taking issue with, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu alike is

not so much illusion or non-illusion, but the implication that Zen is saying there is NO God...which is JUST NOT THE CASE. God or no God, what is being expressed, but overlooked or re-written by a certain amount of zealotry, is not that there is no God, BUT, unlike, for example the Indian side of things, that in Zen's case, God's existence or non-existence is not a mandatory or necessary component of the Enlightenment equation.

Again, citing D.T. Suzuki referring to [Satori](#) and the Enlightenment experience: "...there is always what we may call a sense of the Beyond; the experience indeed is my own but I feel it to be rooted elsewhere. The individual shell in which my personality is so solidly encased explodes at the moment of Satori. Not, necessarily, that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences, becomes loosened somehow from its tightening grip and melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to. The feeling that follows is that of complete release or a complete rest---the feeling that one has arrived finally at the destination...As far as the psychology of Satori is considered, a sense of the Beyond is all we can say about it; to call this the Beyond, the Absolute, or God, or a Person is to go further than the experience itself ([Category Mistake](#)) and to plunge into theology or metaphysics." ([source](#)) One may object that perhaps there are forms of "subtle existence" which do not face the above problems such as *Category Mistakes*, et al. The Buddha, and thus then Zen it would seem, as Zen is a sect of Buddhism after all, DID ALLOW for the possibility of higher realms of existence, such as realms of Gods or spirits. This was a natural corollary of the Doctrine of Rebirth, for one living the Eightfold Path may improve his or her station but not achieve Nirvana or final Enlightenment in this life, like the Venerable Pindola Bharadvaja, and thus continue on for rebirth. However, these possible higher realms of existence, while better, were still not considered eternal.

Besides illusion, hand in hand with the *Chinese-Indian Dichotomy in Advaita and Zen* are supernormal perceptual states called [Siddhis](#). Although Siddhis are known in both Buddhism and Zen, they are most usually associated with the Advaita side of things. Often the case is attributed to the contrast in meditation methods and differences underlying philosophical viewpoints of the cultures in which Zen and Advaita emanate and are practiced --- Pipilika Marg, the "way of the ant" and the closer to Zen *sudden school* "the bird's way," Vihangam Marg, for example. On the Advaita side, and applicable to

Zen as well, it should be noted the Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi has said that a Realized person may not have Siddhis, but may later seek or acquire them after Realization. (i.e., Queen Chudala in *Yoga Vasishtha*). He also said that some Realized persons need not have any Siddhis.

So, the question arises, does a dichotomy arise or is it no more than just a boring conceptual construct propped up out of whole cloth so bigtime spiritual types can bat their gums using mispronounced sanskrit words and their minions can sit around at their feet in awe?

Could be. If you move away from the above visual the whole thing can get complicated the more you read and the deeper you get into it. In a search or research any potential dichotomy usually boils down to differences welling up from two major divisions, the Buddhist version and the Indian version. The main Buddhist thrust is of course, Zen, and lesser so by a little, Buddhism generally. The Indian version is typically related to what is called Advaita. Both main categories break down into several branches, each with their own set of rules to follow if you expect to reach the final goal.

The quote below by Tiruvannamalai-based [Kevinandaji](#), whose stuff I absolutely love but whose blog is universally hated by the hawk Enlightenment crowd, will put into perspective what I present for those who may be so interested because, as Kevinandaji presents it, so closely parallels my perfume on the subject that if I were to write it myself there might be copyright infringements:

"Traditional and Gaudapadian Advaita have failed to address the arguments of Madhyamaka Buddhism. This too is the legacy of Gaudapada's political formulation of Advaita. We know that Gaudapada borrowed from the Madhyamakans and reinterpreted their thesis of non-origination without crediting them. Unlike the Sarvastivadin and Yogacarin positions, the Madhyamaka teaching of non-origination was not nihilist. Its main teachers Nagarjuna and Candrakirti - now classified as Prasangika Madhyamaka - rejected outright both nihilism and eternalism. They advocated instead a new interpretation of the Buddha's Middle Way which says (as modern theoretical physics confirms) that absolutes are

impossible. There cannot truly be any enlightenment, Self or Brahman to attain - nor can there truly be any jiva, "I" or method to attain it. This position does not say "no I" or "no method". It says all things including the person exist as empty, co-dependent arisings which are neither totally existent nor totally non-existent. Methods may happen, methods may not - what happens simply happens - and whether someone practises a method or not is completely irrelevant ..."

Historicly Gaudapada is considered the teacher-guru of Govinda. Govinda inturn, is said to have been the teacher-guru of Shankara --- Shankara being the main bigtime heavyweight dude behind Advaita Vedanta as it has come down to us today. As Kevinandaji points out in the above quote, Gaudapada borrowed from the *Madhyamakans* and reinterpreted their thesis of non-origination without crediting them. While the non-crediting is valid, researchers and scholars on Gaudapada seem to think how and what he has presented his works indicates a strong familiarity with Buddhism both in language and doctrine. Many of those same researchers and scholars seem to think he was originally a Buddhist and simply brought his philosophy with him.

So, what is being said, whichever of the two you seek to use to contribute toward "your mind being ripe," if you seek either, they are in the end, based in common roots. All the bells and whistles are just external trappings like the plumage of the peacock --- to attract you --- that is, if you are a peacock.

Painting legs on a snake won't make it traverse the ground any better or reach it's goal any faster.

## **SRI RAMANA MAHARSHI: THE LAST AMERICAN DARSHAN**

RECOUNTING A YOUNG BOY'S NEARLY INSTANT TRANSFORMATION INTO THE ABSOLUTE DURING HIS ONLY DARSHAN WITH  
THE MAHARSHI



Fundamentally, our experience as experienced is not different from the Zen master's. Where we differ is that we place a fog, a particular kind of conceptual overlay onto that experience and then make an emotional investment in that overlay, taking it to be "real" in and of itself.